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MEDIÆVAL

Alphabets and Initials

FOR

ILLUMINATORS

BY

F. G. DELAMOTTE.

Fourth Edition.



London:
CROSBY LOCKWOOD AND CO.,
7, STATIONERS' HALL COURT, LUDGATE HILL.
1886.

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Introduction.

THERE is neither room nor intention within the limits of a work like the present, for any formal disquisition on the art of initial illumination. An attempt has been made in the *Primer** to lay down a few elementary principles by way of commencement; and the favourable way in which the literary and artistic press—all, in short, whose opinions on such a matter are actually valuable—have received the little work in question, encourages a hope that a second work on the same subject will be acceptable.

For the purpose of the present volume, it will be merely necessary to refer to two of those fixed or first principles already referred to.

1°. Ornamentation and illumination are not convertible terms.

To define the exact boundary between the two is, as has been mentioned in the *Primer* (p. 8), not always easy. To some considerable extent the territories lie so very close together, that there is danger of occasional confusion ; but to take a glaring instance hinted at—no one would accuse the style of caligraphy exhibited by our painters and glaziers of the period on the fronts and sign-boards of shops and public-houses of having the least claim to a place in the category of works of illumination. There is, no doubt, some originality and occasional good taste to be detected in these singular efforts of the limner's art—why, by the way, the ancient sign died out in favour of these remarkable produc-

* Delamotte's *Primer of Illumination.* London : Crosby Lockwood & Co.

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tions, it is not easy to understand, except on the theory that all taste and art suffered together during the Georgian era. The most recent invention in this direction seems to consist of a perspective drawing of a coloured wooden letter previously warped by the July sun; and, though exceedingly uncomfortable to look at, has certainly some recommendation on the ground of originality—but no one would for a moment dream of designating it as illumination. What this really is, it may be best at once to say, is only to be arrived at by a careful study of the best specimens of the art. In the *Primer* some effort has been made to bring such specimens into more general notice; and it may be well here to remind the reader, that the larger and more expensive works on the art referred to in the *Primer*, and in which will be found the results of years of careful study and observation by men of high standing and acknowledged taste, are accessible to all readers at the British Museum. A patient perusal of those books will at once furnish the student with some valuable leading principles, and give him the clue to many sources of more expanded information.

2°. There is a normal or typical form for every letter—a form which may be turned and twisted, expanded, contracted, ornamented, and enriched in fifty different ways, but which is still, in essence and principle, the same. This ought to be more especially borne in mind in a work like the present, treating chiefly of initials. Were this principle more kept in view by modern illuminators we should not have the windows of some artists' colourmen's shops disfigured by dislocated productions at which common sense revolts and good taste shudders, and which remind one strongly of the remarkable composition introduced by the country parish clerk as "an hymn of mine own composing."

The right way to acquire an acquaintance with this normal or typical form of each letter is to collate and compare specimens taken from different periods from

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the 10th to the 15th century. As, however, such a process involves, in many instances, a greater devotion of time and attention than is at everyone's disposal, care has been taken in the present work to select that class of character which tends most directly to develop the normal form. At the same time, an endeavour has been made to choose with judgment. With all our respect for mediæval taste, we utterly repudiate the not uncommon theory, that whatever is old is good. There were faults of drawing and colour in old days as now, and the *facia* daubers of the nineteenth century had their counterparts in the vulgar, flashy, tasteless spoilers of good vellum in the sixteenth. For our selection our own taste is responsible. In the large majority of instances, the letters have been literally copied from works of ascertained authority; in some, the principles deduced from many years' study of such works have been made the basis of original design. In both, the four fundamental principles laid down in the *Primer* (pp. 11 and 12) will be found developed.

The specimens selected begin with the 9th and 10th centuries, when it seems to have been more the custom to deal with the initial letter itself,* and, whilst preserving its normal form, to expand, prolong, and develop it into graceful convolutions of foliage or other ornamentation, treated conventionally. As we progress, it will be found that the letter gradually resumes its simplicity of form, and that the ornamentation is bestowed on its background or *entourage*. It will be observed that as early as the 14th century, the initial had begun to assume the character of a simple outline laid on a rich background, rather than that of a form contorted and developed so as to become in itself an ornament. From this

* Since the *Primer* appeared, a literary friend has suggested that the interlacing so common in the earlier illuminations may have been suggested by the then very prevalent custom of wearing a sort of defensive armour constructed of leather straps crossed in the same way.

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date down to the close of the era of true art in illumination, the tendency appears to have been steadily in this direction, though occasional outbreaks of excellent—not to say exquisite—taste are still from time to time to be detected, especially in the Italian school, which bestow an artistic composition on the initial itself; some specimens of such treatment will be found in our illustrations.

The illustrations for the most part speak for themselves; the earlier ones will be found to exhibit all that strength and freedom of outline, combined with an almost quaint and very characteristic treatment, which distinguish the Anglo-Saxon era in England and the Caroline in France. They will be found useful studies to beginners, whose hands have hardly acquired the lightness and delicacy of touch necessary for the styles of later periods.

On Plate 9 will be found a few specimens of a style at once easy to practise and effective in execution. The pen may here be used with an almost reckless freedom.

Plates 11 and 15 supply specimens of the peculiar Italian style referred to in the *Primer* (page 23), and in which the normal form of initial appears in its appropriate classical development. A cognate set of initials, owing their origin to the same classic soil, appears on Plate 13; whilst Plate 12 exhibits a remarkable, though perfectly authentic, reproduction in the 15th century of almost the identical interlacings of the 10th, only laid on the cartouche of the later period. The initials appearing on Plates 17 and 19 are more or less referable to a style quite unique, and on which we have ventured to bestow the epithet of the "ribbon and flower." It is capable of almost inexhaustible variety of treatment. *Ex abundanti cautelâ*, as the lawyers say, and to answer beforehand any accusation of incompleteness, it may be useful to remind the reader that in mediæval illumination the letters I and J, and U and V, are the same, and that W is always a double V, as its name implies.

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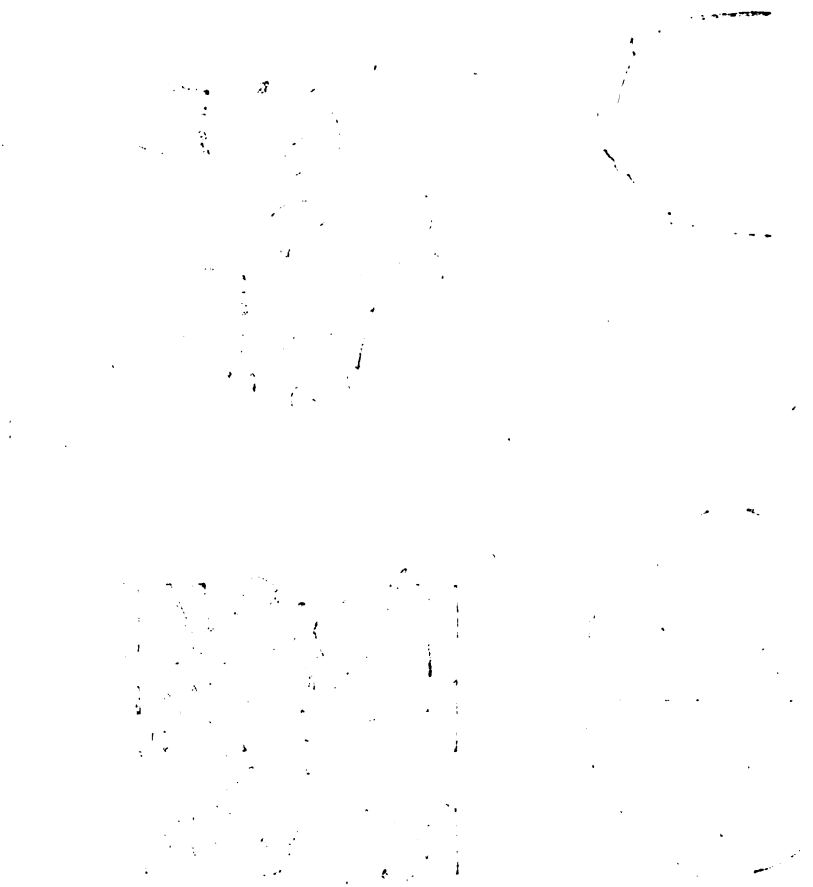
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9th Century.

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10th Century.

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10th Century.

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14th Century.

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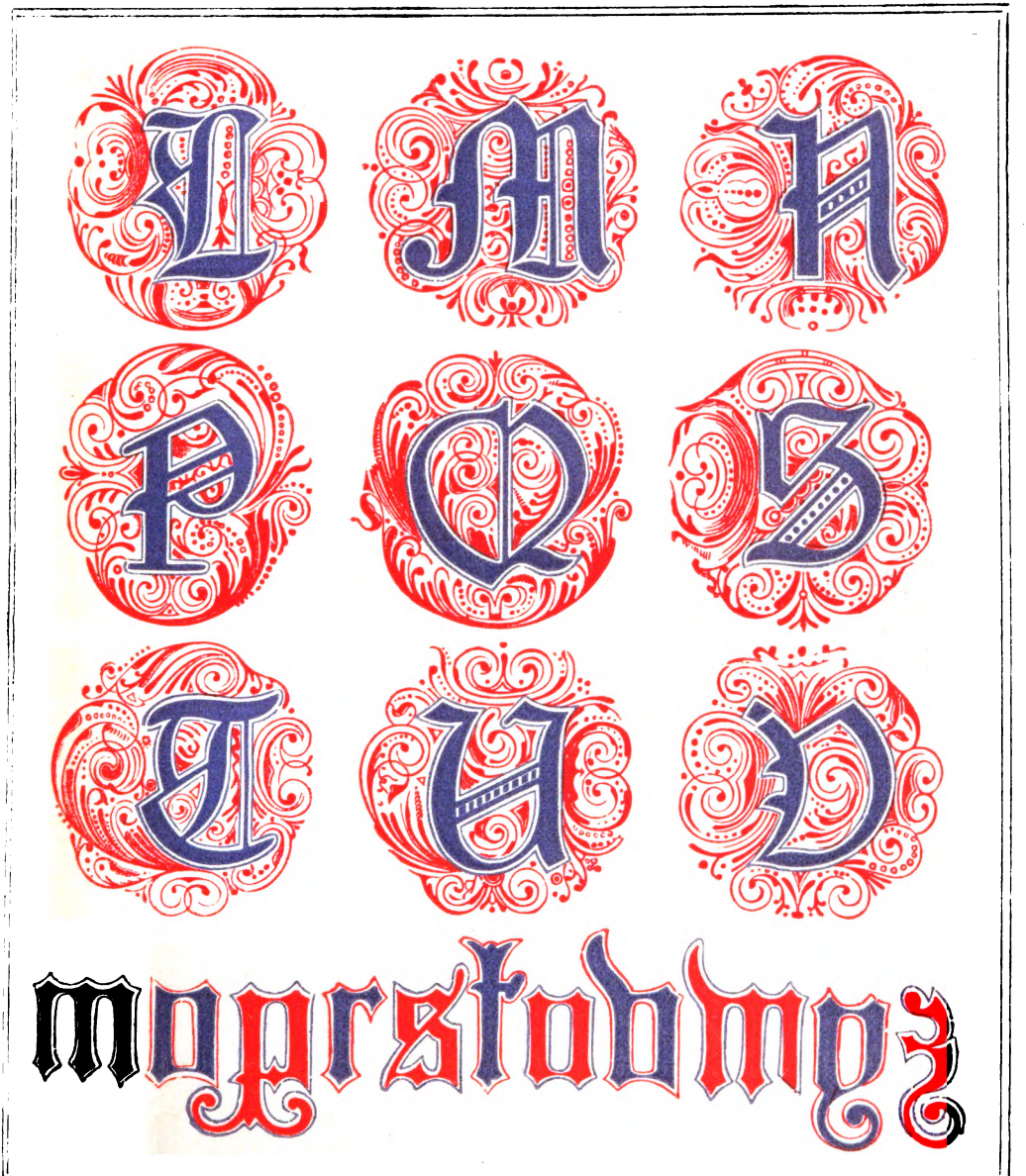
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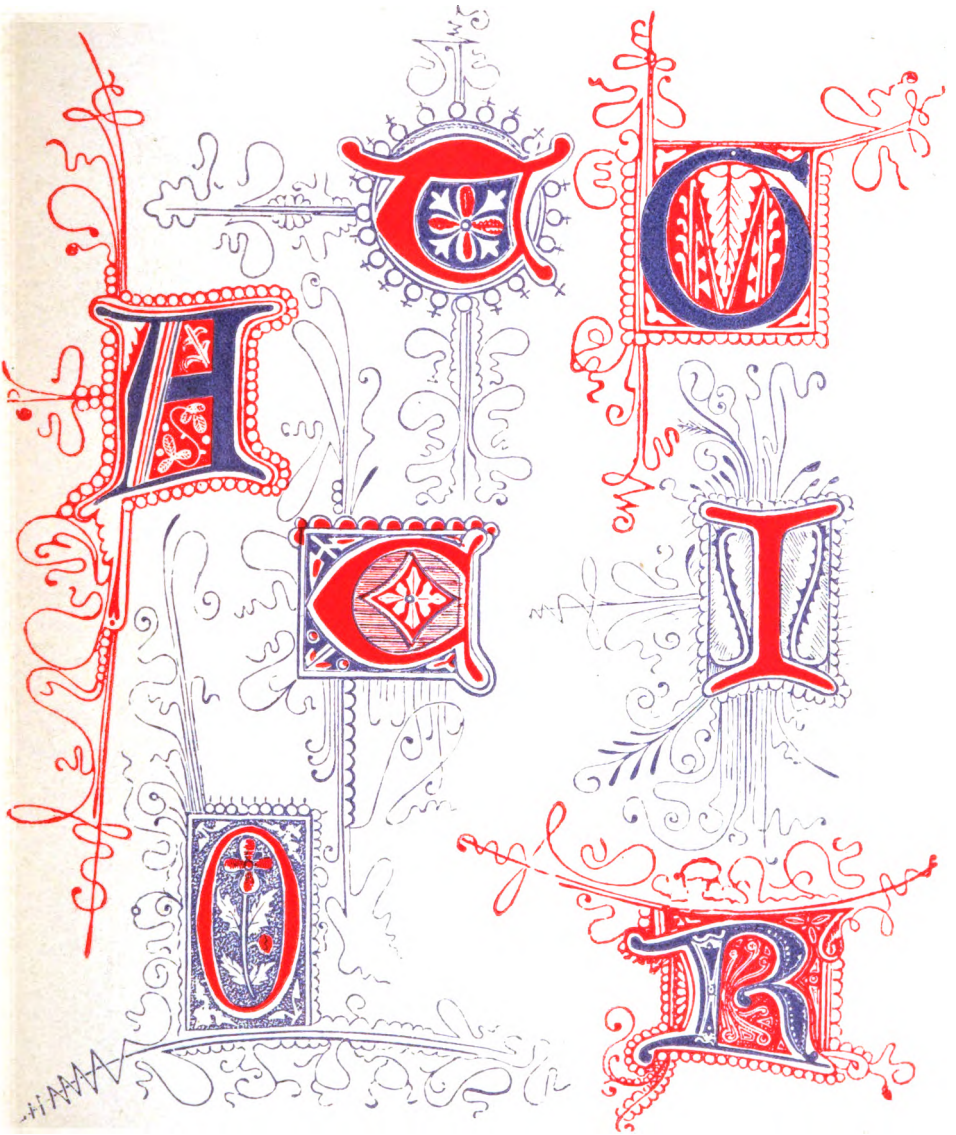
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14th and 15th Centuries.

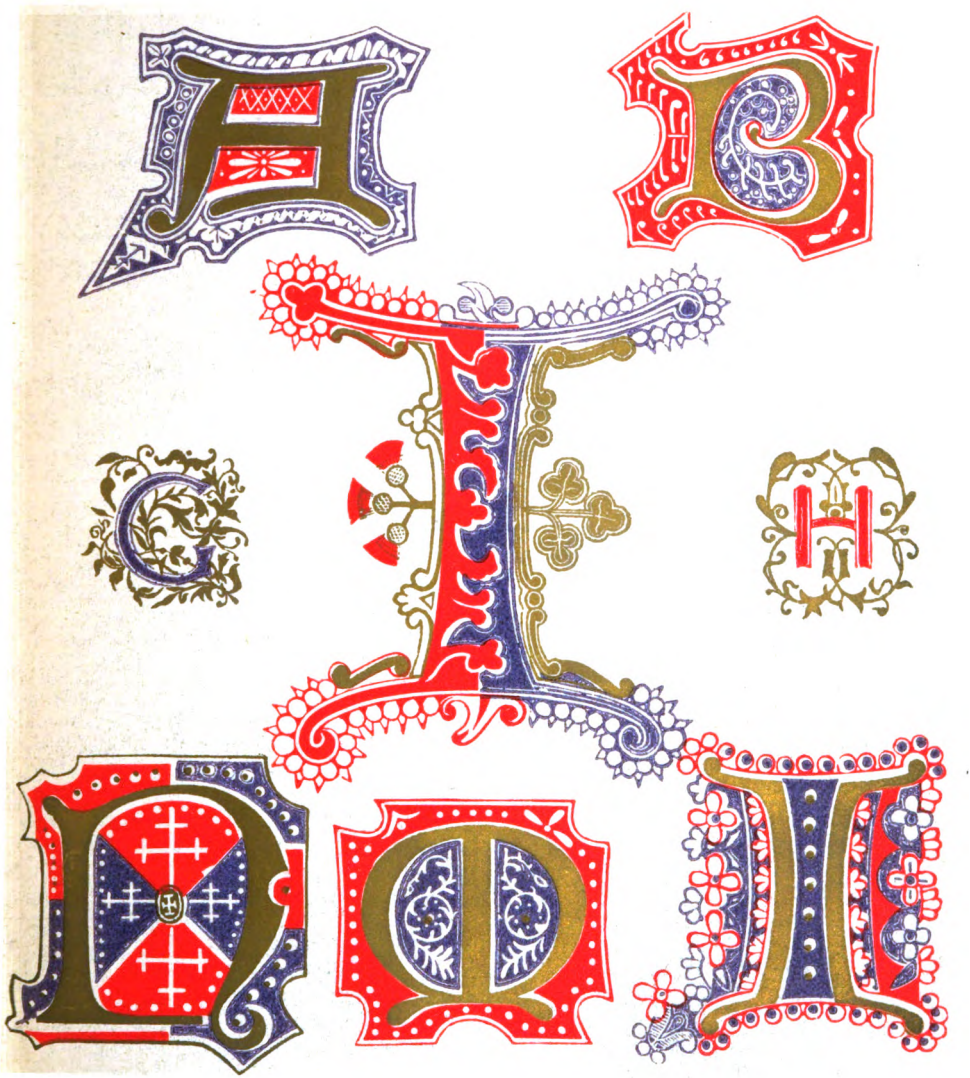
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14th and 15th Centuries.

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15th Century.

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15th Century.

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15th Century. Italian.

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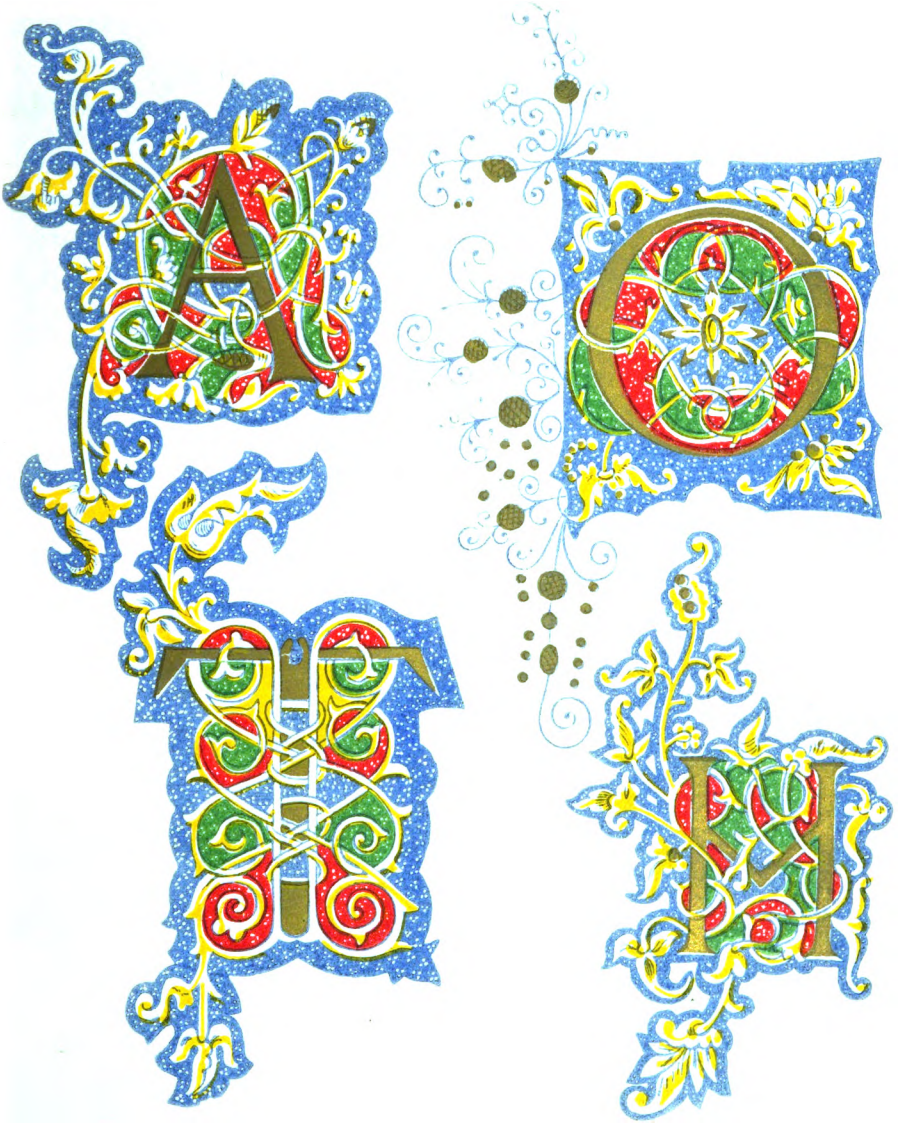
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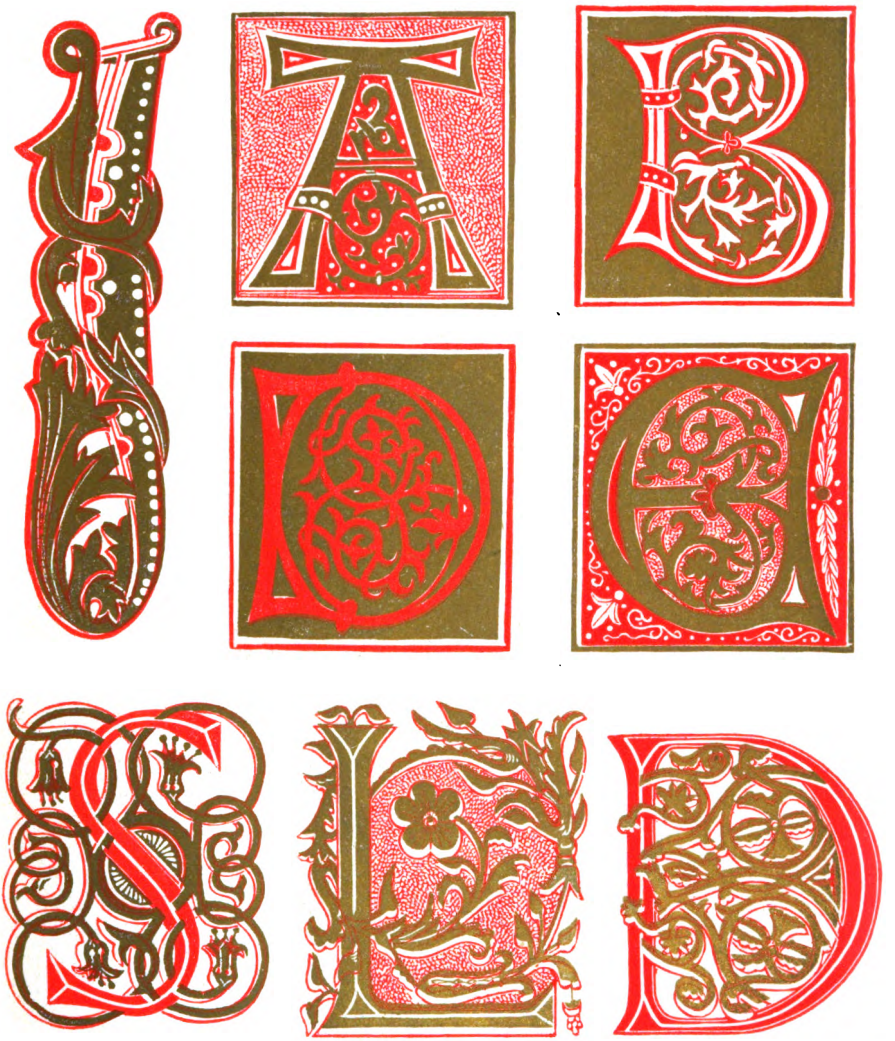
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16th Century. Ribbon and Flower.

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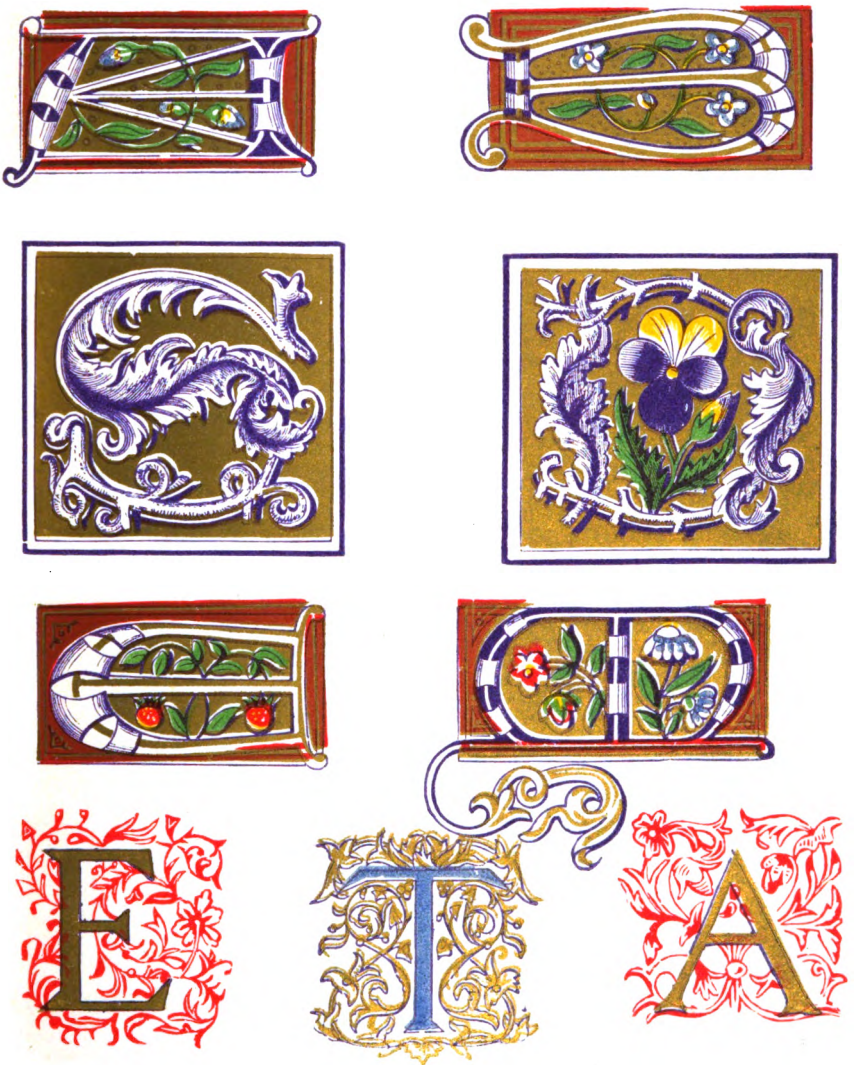
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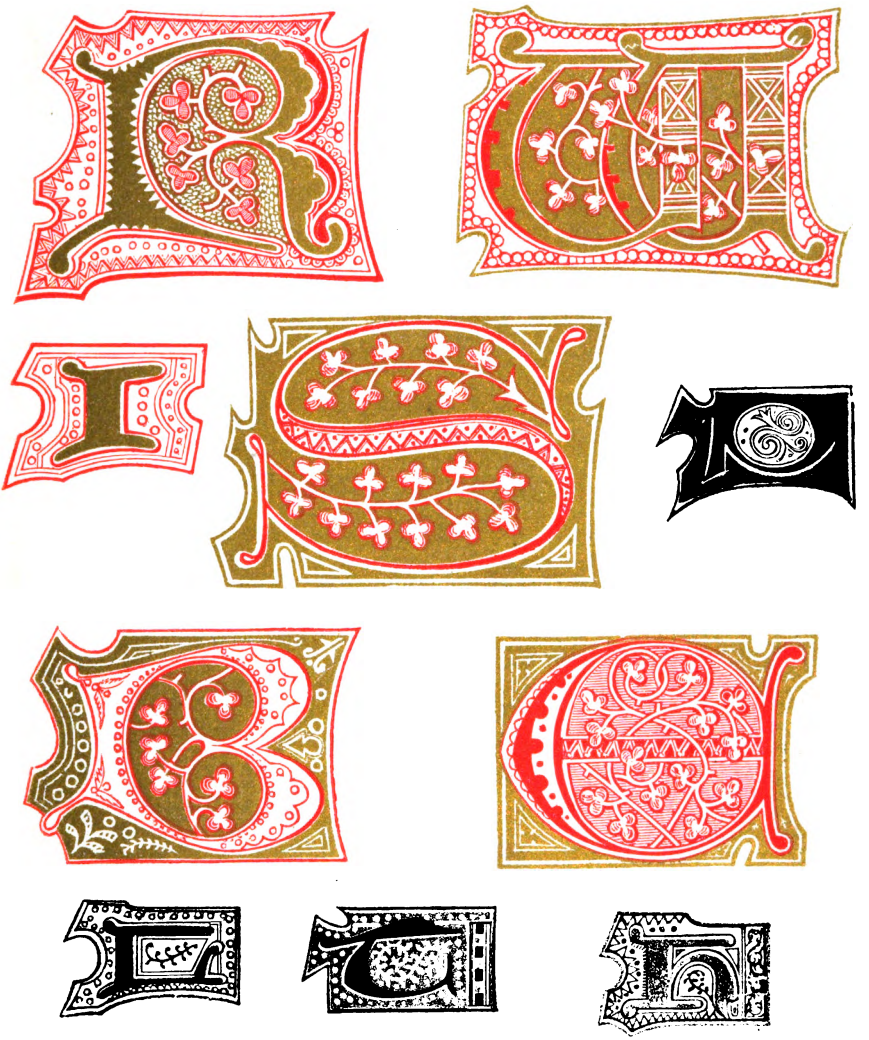
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